

STRATEGIC HUNK OF CORAL

Five years ago, when Britain and the United States drew up plans to build a joint air-sea communications base on the Island of Diego Garcia, few people had ever heard of the tiny coral atoll in the Indian Ocean. Nor did their interest, if any, last very long.

The project was scrapped after the United Nations protested. With U. N. approval, Diego Garcia, a part of the Chagos archipelago, had just been made a part of a new British colonial group called the Indian Ocean Territory. Previously it had been administered by the British colony of Mauritius, a bigger island that became independent in 1965.

Diego Garcia is back in the news again, and for a very good reason—the increasing strength of the Soviet Navy in the Indian Ocean. Now that Britain's new Conservative government has reversed the Labor government and decided to retain some military forces east of Suez, London and Washington are reported to have revived the old Diego Garcia joint base project. It could become a key element in keeping track of the Red Navy in the increasingly important Indian Ocean.

For Russia has quietly been steaming full speed ahead in developing maritime facilities for its shipping, both naval and merchant marine. Its Indian Ocean squadron has been reported at various times as large as 25 to 30 surface ships, plus an undetermined number of submarines.

In 1958, Russia, under an economic agreement with Yemen, provided the basis for the construction of the port of Hodeida. It started work on another at Berbera, Somalia, in 1962. In 1967 a fishing harbor in the Gulf of Suez was undertaken as a joint Soviet-Egyptian project—a convenient haven for Russia's fleet of intelligence-gathering ships that pose as fishing trawlers.

Russia built a shipyard at Basra, Iraq, which the first Red Navy warships visited in May, 1968. Soviet fleet port facilities also have been arranged at Aden, Mogadishu in Somalia, the Seychelles Islands, and the Island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden. The Soviet "fishing" fleet can put in at established berths in Tanzania, Mauritius, Ceylon and at ports along the west coast of India and on the Pakistani coast.

By the admission of its own writers in the Communist Party newspaper Pravda, the Kremlin also has designs on the strategic island of Madagascar, known as the Malagasy republic since it obtained free-

dom from France 10 years ago. Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, lies opposite the Portuguese colony of Mozambique. The island also happens to lie athwart the important sea lanes through which Western Europe gets its oil by tanker from the Middle East.

The strategic importance of the 13-mile long Island of Diego Garcia in all this expanse of water is that it is equidistant between Madagascar and Ceylon—1,200 miles from each island.

Only an occasional fishing vessel puts in now at Diego Garcia and only a handful of people inhabit the hot little tropical island. But all this may change—and soon—as the United States and Britain plan ahead on ways to meet the growing strength of the Red Navy in one of the world's most important oceans.